

Community Service Requirement: Frequently Asked Questions

Revised 5/5/05

Revisions since 3/31/05 release:

- Question #7 revised (faith-based activities)
- Question #19 revised (how students and schools will report compliance)
- Question #25 added (window for activities for Class of 2006)

Revision since 4/20/05 release:

- Question #26 added (earlier deadline set by school's policy)

At a Glance

- Each student in the Class of 2006 and after who wishes to earn a Michigan Merit Award must complete 40 hours of community service.
- Student may not be financially compensated for the service.
- Service may not be for someone related to the student.
- Service performed anytime during high school career is eligible.
- Service must be completed by June 30 of graduation year.
- School has great freedom in establishing policy and qualifying activities.
- If school has no policy, or if student disagrees with what school reports, student may submit Third Party Certification form.

1. *What type of community service qualifies?* - Michigan Merit Award Board Resolution 2004-1, Section B, allows each school “to establish a community service policy that includes criteria for qualifying community service activities,” thus allowing the school to “better identify activities” and “the specific needs of its community.” The resolution gives the school great freedom in establishing a policy that works best for their own students and their own community. The school is the best source of information about what is considered to be qualifying community service.
2. *What type of community service does not qualify?* - While Resolution 2004-1, Section A, defines community service as “an act of assistance or benefit to another or others,” it is implied that the service be for persons unrelated to the student, and is for charitable rather than political purposes. Volunteering to mow your grandmother’s lawn or work on a political campaign, for example, would not qualify as community service. Further, the resolution defines community service as performed voluntarily, so the student may not be financially compensated for the service. Being paid for a service is employment, not volunteerism.
3. *If the school band entertains the public with a concert, can this be counted as community service?* - Resolution 2004-1, Section B, Paragraph 2, excludes “regular extracurricular activities such as athletics, band, choir, etc.” Simply participating in an extracurricular activity is not community service. For example, if the school band held a concert for the public, this would not be community service. However, if the school band traveled to a local retirement center to entertain elderly citizens, this would count toward the 40-hour requirement.
4. *Can the time spent traveling to or from a community service activity count toward the 40-hour requirement?* - The goal is to provide community service within the school district.

Reasonable travel time within the community may be included in counting community service hours. For example, if a student drives 15 minutes from home to (and 15 minutes back home from) a community service activity within the community, the student may count this travel time. However, a student who travels from Detroit to Grand Rapids to perform a community service activity may not count this travel time because the service is not performed within the community.

5. *Is community service performed outside Michigan or even outside the USA eligible?* - Yes. The resolution does not limit community service to that performed in Michigan. Travel time outside the community, however, is not counted toward the 40-hour requirement.
6. *Can the time spent at meetings of an organization whose purpose is community service count toward the 40-hour requirement?* - Simply belonging to the Girl Scouts, for example, and attending their meetings would not count, but the actual community service activities they perform would. However, if members of the Girl Scouts spent two hours planning for a Bake Sale to raise money for a local charity, spent three hours baking cookies, then spent three hours selling the cookies, eight hours could be counted.
7. *Does service for a religious or faith-based organization count?* - Yes. Resolution 2004-1, Section B, cites activities through faith-based organizations as being eligible. Nonpublic schools may include religious or worship-related activities if they feel such activities fall within their definition of community service.
8. *If a school already has a community service program that fits this description, is it acceptable?* - Yes, providing the existing policy requires 40 hours of community service (Resolution 2004-1, Section B).
9. *A school's community service policy requires the Class of 2006 to work just 10 hours of community service, 20 hours for the Class of 2007, etc. Is this acceptable?* - No. Resolution 2004-1, Section D, Paragraph 3, specifies that "beginning with the graduating Class of 2006, each Michigan Merit Award eligible student shall complete a minimum of 40 hours of volunteer community service prior to June 30 of their graduation year." The number of hours is not negotiable, and may not be pro-rated or "phased in." Students in the Class of 2006 are encouraged to immediately begin working on the 40-hour requirement to avoid any "last minute rush" to meet the June 30, 2006, deadline.
10. *Must the school provide a copy of their policy to the Michigan Merit Award Office?* - No, but we would appreciate a copy. In addition, local news media may be interested in knowing how schools and students in their area are responding to the provisions of Resolution 2004-1.
11. *Is it permissible for students to receive academic credit for volunteering somewhere?* - Yes. The resolution does not prohibit the student from deriving a benefit, such as class credit, membership in the National Honor Society, etc.
12. *If a student already performs community service as a requirement for membership in the National Honor Society or similar organization, can these hours count toward the 40-hour requirement?* - Yes.
13. *May the school require the student to perform community service at a specific event on a specific date/time?* - Yes, as long as the student is not financially compensated for the work performed.

14. *Can court-ordered community service, such as a juvenile's sentence/restitution, count toward the 40-hour requirement?* - Yes.
15. *Are there liability concerns for schools?* - All questions regarding liability, insurance, etc., should be referred to the school's legal staff or representative.
16. *What is a student's "high school career?"* - The resolution does not specify when a student's "high school career" begins, so we define "high school career" to begin the day after the student's 8th grade school year ends. Resolution 2004-1, Section D, Paragraph 3, specifies that the community service be performed prior to June 30 of the student's graduation year. Students in the Class of 2006 are encouraged to immediately begin working on the 40-hour requirement to avoid any "last minute rush" to meet the June 30, 2006, deadline. (Also see Questions #25 and #26)
17. *What if a school chooses not to adopt a policy?* - Resolution 2004-1, Section D, directs the Michigan Merit Award Office to "accept third party verification in cases where the local or private boards or high school principals or home school did not establish a policy, or if the student disagrees with the high school principal's failure or refusal to make certification of compliance for the student. The Merit Board will require a certification of compliance by an organization or person unrelated to the student who supervised the student's performance of their volunteer community service." In such cases, the student may download a Third Party Certification form from our Web site and submit it to our office.
18. *May the Third Party Certification form be submitted for something less than 40 hours, or must it be for the entire 40 hours?* - We prefer that the Third Party Certification form be used to report the full 40 hours of community service. This reduces the possibility for lost paperwork due to multiple forms submitted by the same student. But the form may be used to report fewer than 40 hours.
19. *What will the student be asked to certify? What will the school be asked? How will the student/school report the information to the Michigan Merit Award Office?* - Sometime before the qualifying student starts college, the Michigan Merit Award Office will ask the student to provide certain information (the college attended, when award money should be paid to the college, etc.). This information is reported either through "Online Certification" on the Internet or on a paper Certification form sent to each qualifying senior. One of the questions will be, "Did you complete 40 hours of community service?" A similar question will be asked of the high school. Beginning with the Class of 2006, the paper Michigan Merit Award Status List sent to schools will include a column for the school to verify that the student performed 40 hours of community service. The column will ask, "Did the student complete 40 hours of community service?" The school will simply check yes or no. An award payment may not be made unless both the student and the school answer yes (Resolution 2004-1, Section D, Paragraph 4). The Michigan Merit Award Office is currently exploring an electronic way for schools to report compliance. Such electronic reporting system is expected to be ready by December 2005. Details are not yet available.
20. *What documentation should be kept by the school? By the student?* - Schools and students may keep as much or as little documentation as they feel is necessary to help them verify that the student indeed performed 40 hours of community service. Schools may, for example, find it helpful to develop their own internal form on which students can track their community service hours (date, nature of the service, etc.) then later submit it to the school's Guidance Office.

21. *Is there a deadline for reporting to the Michigan Merit Award Office?* - No, but “payment of the student’s Michigan Merit Award will not be made unless the Michigan Merit Award Office receives verification, from the school and the student, that the service has been completed” (Resolution 2004-1, Section D, Paragraph 4).
22. *Are there any exemptions based on physical limitations or religion?* - No. The resolution does not provide for any exemptions. “Beginning with the graduating Class of 2006, each Michigan Merit Award eligible student shall complete a minimum of 40 hours of volunteer community service prior to June 30 of their graduation year” (Resolution 2004-1, Section D, Paragraph 3).
23. *Where can a student find opportunities for community service?* - It is likely that the school’s policy will contain suggestions for finding community service opportunities. The student can also look in a local telephone directory for charitable organizations, particularly the local Volunteer Center or United Way. If unable to locate a local agency, contact the Volunteer Centers of Michigan (phone 517/492-2430, or www.mivolunteers.org) or the Michigan Community Service Commission (phone 517/335-4295, or www.michigan.gov/mcsc) for ideas.
24. *Does the Michigan Merit Award Board have the authority to require such service?* - Yes. Public Act 94 of 1999, Section 7 (4e), authorizes the Michigan Merit Award Board to establish additional eligibility requirements. The Board exercised its authority to do so when it adopted Resolution 2004-1 in August 2004.

Added 4/20/05:

25. *May I count community service hours performed prior to August 2004 when the resolution was adopted?* - Yes. For the Class of 2006, the window for performing the 40 hours of community service is from the day after the student’s 8th grade school year ended through June 30, 2006. (See Question #16.)

Added 5/5/05:

26. *What if the high school’s policy sets a deadline that is earlier than the resolution’s June 30 deadline?* - Resolution 2004-1, Section D, Paragraph 3, specifies that the community service be performed prior to June 30 of the student’s graduation year. The school, however, certainly has the right to set an earlier deadline if it wishes. If the student is unable to complete the 40 hours of community service by the deadline set in the school’s policy, the student may submit the Third Party Certification form directly to the Michigan Merit Award Office (see Question #17). Under no circumstance will community service be accepted if it is performed after June 30 of the student’s graduation year.